

Missing Mass

Perhaps it's because we are obliged to attend Sunday Mass under pain of mortal sin, that we so often feel guilty if we miss Mass even when it isn't our fault. But aren't obligation and guilt rather sad reasons for celebrating the eucharist in the first place?

God has commanded us to keep holy the Sabbath Day principally by resting from servile work, but, in addition, the first precept of the Church says that we are obliged *to sanctify the day commemorating the Resurrection of the Lord...in the first place by participating in the Eucharistic celebration and by resting from works and activities which could impede such a sanctification of these days.*¹

The catechism teaches that *the Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life [and] is the sum and summary of our faith.*² If we truly recognise and believe this then, first of all, why would we choose not to celebrate Sunday Mass at least, and, secondly, why would we need laws of obligation in order to ensure our presence at Mass?

As children we no doubt needed to know the boundaries as we grew in our knowledge of God and his Church, just as we did in most aspects of life also. And, as children, one of the ways this was achieved was in terms of rules and the consequences of breaking those rules. Whilst the three hundred and seventy questions and answers of the old "penny catechism" gradually introduced us to the tenets of the Catholic faith, not a few of them also introduced us to the consequences of not keeping to those tenets. It may not have been the best teaching method by today's educational practices, but just look where relaxing that method has got us! We at least knew where we stood and, in particular, what was sinful and what wasn't. The problem is that many adults today haven't moved beyond that very legalistic approach to their relationship with God and, as a result, tend to measure that relationship in terms of the gold stars they try to achieve for good behaviour or, perhaps, for avoiding bad behaviour.

So, then, as children the rule we learned was that you had to go to Mass on Sundays and holydays or it was a mortal sin. And while that is still the case³, as adults we should also have learned that there are some exceptions to that rule. For something to be seriously sinful it has to involve serious matter (which deliberately missing Mass does) but also our free choice to do it knowing that it's wrong. If you are too ill to leave the house, or you need someone to take you to Mass but there wasn't anyone, or the weather was too bad for you to

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para 2042, referring both to Sundays and holydays of obligation.

² para's 1324 & 1327.

³ "Those who deliberately fail in this obligation commit a grave sin" (para 2181 of the *Catechism*).

venture out safely, then obviously it isn't your fault if you miss Mass - you couldn't do anything about it. It's a very different situation to waking up on Sunday morning and deciding you can't be bothered to go to Mass, which involves a deliberate choice to not do something you know you should be doing. The same might be said about partying so much the night before that you aren't in a fit state next morning to get to Mass. To be on holiday and absolutely unable to find a Catholic church isn't your fault, but not bothering to look or not checking out the situation in advance is another matter. And then, with as many different Mass times as many parishes offer at weekends, there is no excuse for other Sunday morning activities getting in the way of the one thing that ought to be vitally important to us as Catholics.

The thing is though, that a constant factor in what I have just been saying is the aspect of obligation and what the consequences might be of not fulfilling it. And so I return to the point I began with: if the Mass is as central and vital and important to us as it should be as Catholics, why should we ever have been made to go out of obligation?

[The Church still uses the phrase "holyday of obligation" to refer to those days other than Sunday when we are obliged to go to Mass and rest from servile work as on a Sunday. Many have now been moved to the nearest Sunday to save these solemnities from being treated in an inferior way to Sundays given that so many people were simply not bothering to go to Mass despite the aspect of obligation (and the possible resulting mortal sin). To many this seems like an accommodation, a lowering of standards, rather than challenging people to observe and celebrate such important dates on the Church's calendar. It is, perhaps, easier to forget holydays than Sundays because they are so few and far between, and while forgetting may not be sinful, what do we need to do to make sure we remember?]

It was no doubt meant to educate us, as we grew, in appreciating the importance of Sunday Mass, but it may have encouraged a very impoverished approach to the greatest source of grace and the greatest spiritual celebration we have as Catholics.

It might, perhaps, have been better if the Church had taught that we should go to Mass at least once a week; at least then we would be going more by choice, on a day of our choosing. However, the Mass is meant to be a communal celebration, ideally with the faith community gathered around the one altar, and this would never happen if we could go to any Mass on any day of the week. It's bad enough that we have several Sunday Masses in a typical parish when they aren't really needed and therefore the faith community is unnecessarily divided between those various Masses without equally unnecessarily taking away from the importance of the Sunday (Sabbath) celebration. Under normal circumstances, of course, the Church doesn't have the freedom to make the requirement of Sunday Mass flexible because it is tied to God's commandment to keep holy the Sabbath day, and the Sabbath day for us is Sunday.

I used the phrase “under normal circumstances” with a specific situation in mind. In a certain Middle Eastern country where I once worked, the working week was from Saturday to Wednesday and the weekend was Thursday and Friday. Therefore “Sunday” was Friday and I worked on Fridays. In fact part of my work was setting up the places where church services were held and yet on most Fridays I wasn’t free to go to Mass myself. My days off were Saturday and Sunday and so I would go to “Sunday Mass” on Sunday - even though Sundays weren’t “Sundays” there. It was the best I could do. And because my Sunday wasn’t everyone else’s “Sunday”, I had to make a very conscious effort to keep “my” Sabbath holy. But in our particular situation, we were allowed to be flexible in many aspects of our church and faith life. The same would be true in a mission situation where a priest has to cover a vast area and “Sunday” Mass is celebrated in a town or village as and when he can get there.

In this country we are spoiled for Masses - and churches - and the only time anything should prevent us from celebrating Sunday Mass should be extraordinary and unavoidable situations over which we have no control. Even then we should want to celebrate Mass at the first possible opportunity – again not because we *have* to but because we *want* to, because the eucharist should be that important to us. It should be our spiritual breath and quench our spiritual thirst.

I think it’s a great indicator of someone’s deep love for the Mass if, when they miss Mass through no fault of their own (through illness, etc), they feel the need to mention it in confession. But I would have to repeat that they don’t need to because, under the circumstances, missing Mass wasn’t their fault and therefore wasn’t a sin. Perhaps what they are experiencing is a very real spiritual and sacramental emptiness and perhaps, also, a disappointment at having missed out on the spiritual nourishment that is so important to them. One way to hopefully put that right would be to go to Mass at the first possible opportunity - and it would be quite OK to go to communion at that Mass because the reason they missed Sunday Mass wasn’t sinful.

Just to repeat, however, what would be sinful (and needs to be taken care of in confession before going to communion again) is a quite deliberate choice not to go to Mass on Sunday, or to not be able to go through our own fault, or not to have made an effort to find a church or the times of Masses when we could have done so. But, again, it would be a very sad reason for going to Sunday Mass if it was only out of obligation and to avoid sin. In fact, if in someone’s mind and heart they really don’t want to be there, then their physical presence may not be doing them very much good even though, legally, they are fulfilling their obligation. (We are reminded of Our Lord’s parable of the guest coming to the wedding feast but not dressed in a wedding garment.) We have come a long way from the simple, legal observance of the answer to Q.230 of the “penny

catechism”: *The first Commandment of the Church is to keep the Sundays and Holydays of Obligation holy, by hearing Mass and resting from servile works. We no longer simply “hear” Mass, we are now invited to conscious, active, and full participation.*⁴ We speak now of “celebrating” the Mass together as a worshipping community, a celebration that *remains the centre of the Church’s life.*⁵ Indeed, *the Sunday Eucharist is the foundation and confirmation of all Christian practice.*⁶

Even more basic than that is the fact that it is Our Lord himself who invites us to Mass. He celebrated the Last Supper with his disciples, consecrating bread and wine to his body and blood for them to receive, and asking them to continue the celebration in his memory. Our celebration of Mass is his greatest gift to us, the gift of himself in word and in sacrament. *Participation in the communal celebration of the Sunday Eucharist is a testimony of belonging and of being faithful to Christ and to his Church. The faithful give witness by this to their communion in faith and charity.*⁷

There is, it seems to me, a similar danger to that of deciding that we don’t need the sacrament of reconciliation - Jesus thought it was necessary and that’s why he gave his apostles the authority to forgive sins. If, in the same way, we decide for ourselves whether or not we’ll go to Mass, are we not only contradicting Our Lord’s wisdom and purpose in leaving us that treasure, but also denying the vital importance of the Mass to our lives and our faith as followers of Christ? Realising and accepting these truths is why we should want to celebrate Mass at every opportunity – *want* to, not *have* to.

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Fr Neil McNicholas

⁴ *General Instruction of The Roman Missal* (2005), para 18.

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para 1343.

⁶ “ “ “ , para 2181.

⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para 2182.